

A STUDY OF THE DECISION-MAKING
PROCESS DURING THE CREATIVE ACT

PROJECT IN LIEU OF THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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August, 1984

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this thesis project was to explore my decision-making process as it took place during the act of painting. I was interested in how my paintings evolved, either naturally or through a critical stage. Resolving a work which was in a crisis between success and failure was an important part of the creative process and required definite purposive action on my part. In this connection, I explored the nature of the decisions which either redirected my work toward a successful conclusion, or toward its abandonment.

It was anticipated that there existed either a philosophical or a formal structure to my decision-making process. I was, therefore, also interested in exploring the possibility of such a structure or pattern which would lend itself to an understanding of how my work evolved as a whole.

Statement of the Problem

The problem in this project was to determine if there was a common thread running through my decision-making process which took place during the creative act of

painting. One that might reveal how my work evolved and acquired a meaningful, intuited presence. In this connection I considered the paintings both individually and as a whole--from my personal viewpoint.

Simple images such as the circle, the rectangle, the square, the helix, and the chair--which was an extension of these forms--acquired a meaningful significance in relationship to painterly concerns and to the context in which they existed. The ways in which the medium was used to carry or create a lifelike energy--and the ways in which the images achieved a significant meaning--were the main considerations which brought each work into focus and continuity with my own artistic intentions. I, therefore, considered decisions regarding paint and paint application, the pictorial space, color, size and imagery, and the ways in which these considerations contributed to an intuited significance or presence in my work. In considering the qualitative effect of those decisions as an end result, I anticipated that a pattern would evolve out of the decisions I made regarding these concerns, and that the discovery of such a pattern or structure would contribute toward an understanding of how the body of work evolved and grew.

Methodology

I produced ten works in the project, five of which will be analyzed in this paper. Simple shapes and images provided the format for the entire project. The medium was oil on gessoed canvas. I kept a private journal to record experiences and ideas relating to the individual works and my responses to them as they were produced. I interpreted the works by considering the technicalities of paint application, texture, size, and color. I also creatively defined the imagery in relationship to context.

At the conclusion of this project I discovered a structure or pattern to my decisions that led to an understanding of the nature of my own creative process as it evolved from the comprehensive body of work.

CHAPTER II

ANALYSIS OF ART WORKS

Discussion

In addressing the decision-making process in the act of painting, I shall discuss the ways in which the medium created a lifelike energy, and the ways in which the imagery acquired a significant meaning. The discussion will focus on the pictorial space in which simple images acquired a contextualized meaning, and how that meaning was enhanced by refinement of the paint application.

At the beginning of the project I wished to create a harmonious body of work that related interdependently. I, therefore, decided to limit the works in two respects. First, I chose to limit the palette to black and white values and eliminate color altogether. Second, I selected a square format, 60" x 60". The use of black and white values and the square format prevailed throughout the project and served to make the body of work a cohesive one. The 60-inch square format became a repeated image that related to the simple imagery in the work, and the use of a black ground throughout the body of work created an objective field for the white images.

In the first painting, Rectangle, the image was a simple rectangle. From the beginning it was imbued with a

lifelike energy. I had put in a circle and a line but the painting read as a landscape because of the placement of these images so I took them out leaving only the rectangle. The piece became much less defined as a landscape and open to a more creative response. The atmosphere created by this lone rectangular image provoked me to ask whether the image floating in the space was a sculptural image or something referring to life or some relevant functional end. The vacant pictorial space offered no answers, and so a sense of anxiety was created by this ambiguous energetic image which led me to seek some sort of definition through overlapping or familiar similarities. The image, however, was hypothetical and remained in a state of undefined suspension. Although a familiar image, it lacked a formula by which it could be defined. Its symbolism was its only logic, which did not translate into a fixed meaning, but invited a new perspective to a familiar image. This, I realized, was its meaning, which changed in the very process of interpretation by each viewer. The image eluded a fixed definition and offered a metaphor of life's energy. It was affected by the pictorial space in which it resided by the fact that the non-contextualized space allowed it to exist in a hypothetical state.

In Rectangle, a history of the mistakes remained evident in the work as a result of the problems encountered

in applying the paint thinly. An aura of the white circle and the line which I had removed from the work still remained, attesting to decisions and actions taken to resolve the problem of the landscape. This history about the past actions became an honest history of change that gave a sense of integrity to the work.

In this painting, the black ground was applied moderately thin, which at the time seemed most refined. The edges had not yet become a matter of great importance; however, there was a moderate sensitivity to them, and I began to experience a wish to preserve them.

The second painting, Childhood Games, was a large, static white circle painted on a simple black ground. It looked like a Miro-shape which fixed it in the context of modern art. It was history categorized and fixed in the context of yesterday. It was an absolute failure. I took purposive action to resolve this by trying to erase the circle--to paint over it--but it would not be covered. I acknowledged its obstinance and added a line. It changed radically as it became an object rather than a form or simple shape. I added another white mark--a handprint--and meaning became apparent. The circle had become an image that was childlike and playful, such as a balloon floating in space or a lollipop, while the white handprint which left streaks across the canvas was foreboding of death. The two

images seemed to inform how the other image was to be defined. Thus, their context was created by their opposite meanings of the playfulness of life, and a sense of desperation or foreboding of death. I tended to feel this contradiction of life and death in the work. Life had become a balloon floating away or an all-day sucker melting away. The skeletal handprint emphasized this interpretation of the work.

The painting evoked a meaning which was created by the relationship between the familiar images. The vacant, dark space set the mood in the work, and the intuited meaning lay in the context created by the relationship between the two images. In Rectangle the context created by the imagery did not control the viewer, but rather I was able to respond creatively to the work which contained only a single, undefined image in a vacant pictorial space. In Childhood Games, however, the creative response was limited by the contextualized, self-defining relationship between the images which had become realistic objects rather than abstract forms.

In Childhood Games, I found that minimizing the texture necessitated that I resolve mistakes by learning to accept them since it was impossible to totally erase them. The Miro-like circle would not be concealed by covering it, nor removed by wiping it away, and so I resolved to deal with it in a more creative way by adding to it. I sought

the simplest resolution available and added a line. The struggle, however, was evident in the texture of the paint application. Again, as in Rectangle, I was aware of decisions and reversals of decisions made in the painting process which remained evident in the work. The handprints in the work were the result of a frustrated reaction which I instantly liked, and the painting was finished.

I realized, again, the texture carried within it an honest reflection of my responses to the work in progress, and I felt this gave it a quality of truth that could only be realized through an intimate relationship with the medium. Through the struggle of resolving this work, I gained a new respect for paint in the realization that it was the embodiment of truth in the work. This realization provoked a new approach to paint which was evident in my next painting, Small Circle.

The third painting, Small Circle, was the end result of the changes that took place in Rectangle and Childhood Games. The work achieved a balance and order that emerged through the power of simple directness in the creative process that had resulted from the struggle I encountered in the first two paintings. It invited both humor and philosophical interest. The image was still the circle, but in a new post-modern form. This painting had a strange, quiet stability in an ambiguous space that neither required nor allowed definition. The space simply allowed the image

its own integrity by not interfering in its mysterious qualities. The image was totally oriented in this empty space as it simultaneously offered both a humorous and an intuited insight into the nature of simple form.

In Small Circle I had finally realized that the less textural, or the more refined, the paint application became, the more it carried its own emotional qualities rather than mine. I no longer wished to manipulate the paint, but rather to discover its inherent qualities. I began to concentrate on applying the black ground much more thinly so that I might do likewise with the white images which would be placed on it. I was seeking an overall sense of refinement in texture in both the ground and the image which related sensitively to each other. As the paint became more minimal there was also a new awareness of the gessoed surface which began to interact with the painted surface and add a sense of transparency to the pictorial space. I was, by now, very much aware of a floating sensation in the pictorial space that resulted from refinement in the texture. This evolved into a concern with the edges. I wanted to preserve the edges for they seemed to add a new spatial dimension to the work.

The experience of painting the small white circle was rather indescribable. I had no idea what I intended to paint, but I knew it would be simple and direct. The result was quite a surprise. I immediately liked it. As

I see it now, the strange sense of equilibrium that came through in the image was a result of the simple and direct paint application and my decision to allow the medium to do the work. This simplified approach resulted from the struggles that took place in the previous works, and it was also a turning point in the project. I had already learned to resolve mistakes by accepting them as a part of the history of the work; the next step was simply accepting what was created when emotional superficialities were removed from the creative process. In Small Circle I experienced a change in the creative process which was to play a major role in the works to come.

At this point, I was seeking familiar ground in which to practice this new method of simple and direct paint application, and so I returned to the chair. The result was Gothic Chair and Lost Chair, the last two paintings in the project. The chair image had always represented a human confrontation with space as it hauntingly confronted such human questions as "Who am I?" "Where am I going?" or "What am I doing here?" These questions arose solely because there was no defining context, and therefore, no mirror or knowledge of the self. The anthropomorphic chair represented different human postures one could take in responding to an elusive reality and the knowledge that there were no answers to the obvious questions about life.

The last two paintings, Gothic Chair and Lost Chair, represented this dilemma of humankind.

In both these paintings, the chair was obviously not one which functioned as a chair. Rather, the chairs were imbued with certain human qualities that elicited human responses and--at the same time--were structured from simple, changeless forms such as rectangles and lines. I liked the chair image because it was capable of portraying such human qualities as fear and anger, or any possible emotion that might pass through the mind of the viewer who experienced the work. It required viewer participation and invited me to supply the meaning in the work by responding to it creatively--personally interpreting the emotional quality therein. The chair was defined by the conceptualized context imposed upon it by the viewer, while the pictorial space was important in setting the mood for the relationship between the viewer and the works.

In Gothic Chair I became more concerned with the ground and made decisions to experiment with the gesso by limiting it to only one application (rather than two or three), and I also left it rough rather than sanding it so that the gessoed surface would interact more directly with the paint. My concern was now concentrated in the paint application and its effect upon the pictorial space in the work. In Gothic Chair and Lost Chair I developed a method of application which was extraordinarily thin and relatively

even, and one that was instrumental in developing a subtle textural effect in the pictorial space which contributed to the floating sensation.

Minimizing texture in my work simplified the entire process of painting. The emphasis in the project had become focussed on my ability to resolve the work in terms of imagery that would carry significant meaning without being gratuitous. The chair image functioned very well for me in this respect. In Gothic Chair the image was painted in a very simple manner, without textural effects. Lost Chair, however, reflected a much stronger emotional expressiveness, but the approach was direct and honest and I considered the work a success.

Summary

In the pictorial space wherein dual images existed, as in Childhood Games, the images tended to define each other as they created a context of their own and imposed their meaning in the works. This became apparent to me in Childhood Games, and I felt it was an important discovery in understanding why the lone chair image functioned so effectively. The dual images tended to mirror some aspect of meaning in each other by providing additional information. The lone image, however, had to either find definition in itself, as Small Circle, or, as in the chair paintings, confront the knowledge that there was no absolute meaning

or continuity except that which would emerge from the particular context provided by each viewer. I felt this accounted for the subtle humor of Small Circle and its strange, quiet stability in an ambiguous space that neither required nor allowed a contextualized definition.

The work evolved in relationship to paint application in several ways. In the process of refining the paint application, the texture became more minimal and the space achieved a "floating" quality which, in turn, began to change and define the pictorial field by bringing the edges of the field into the pictorial space. Paint application also began to determine the content, in the sense that a history of the decisions made during the painting process remained as part of the imagery which could not be covered or obliterated--only changed. It dictated that I accept my mistakes as part of the meaning in the work. Last, and perhaps most important, paint application determined the ways in which the pictorial space and the imagery began to interact. With the refinement in paint application, the pictorial space in the last three paintings--Small Circle, Gothic Chair and Lost Chair--alluded more and more to a non-contextualized space in which I was allowed to creatively interpret the images.

In exploring my own interpretations of the images I found that when juxtaposing two or more images (as in Childhood Games) the relationship between the images created

a context in which they acquired definition, limiting a creative response to the work. A single abstract image, however, in the non-contextualized space eluded a fixed definition, and acquired definition only when I imposed a fixed meaning upon the work. At the same time, however, this fixed meaning mirrored my own subconsciously contextualized interpretation of the image. I realized that every individual brings with them a way of seeing and feeling, and the images had an indefinite variety of meanings that branched out into different directions as contexts varied. The space in the work became then the conscious ground for experiencing my own limitations, and I simultaneously understood that by imposing a meaning upon the work I was caught in a context which I had arbitrarily created for myself--one that mirrored myself.

With the chair image I realized a legitimate life game: "How to escape the context which we each create for ourselves." This thought led necessarily to the idea of change, and the fact that it had taken two forms during the project: (1) subtle change and (2) radical change. I realized that the creative process was structured around these two modes of change, and also that the common thread running through the decision-making process had been structured around them. Each painting had necessitated decisions regarding change, and the decisions had unconsciously centered around them. I realized that not only did

images become meaningful relative to changing points of view and changing contexts, but the changing paint application also played a major role in refining the quality and meaning of the work. Most important, however, was the knowledge that grew out of changes which took place in the creative experience itself, for through the creative process I began to understand the value of change for the sake of change alone. Not only is it the essence of the creative spirit, but it is also the essence of life as it evolves and changes with the energies of nature. My ability to evoke and adapt to radical change was the major adjustment necessary to resolve and salvage work in a crisis. My sensitivity to subtle change played an important role in refining, interpreting, and responding intuitively to successful works.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

The Creative Experience of Radical and Subtle Change

Change is the process which gives birth to new forms in art and to new ways of seeing. Different perspectives converge giving an objective, qualitative meaning to life experiences. Change is a cumulative process. One experiences a better understanding of the role it plays each time one encounters it objectively. In this project I found that my art evolved both individually and as a cumulative whole as a result of the changes which took place during the creative experience.

The major discovery at the end of this project was an understanding of the structure of these changes, and the nature of change itself. Change is a natural characteristic of life and entropy. To reject change is to reject the inevitable processes of nature. To accept and flow with change, however, is to discover its innate meaning and the ways in which we adapt our lives to the processes of life and death.

In the creative experience we must liberate ourselves from a fixed context in order to understand changing circumstances. The more radical the change, the more

creative it will be. Life invites us to make choices which often fix us within a certain personal and arbitrary context, or sets us upon a radically changing experience--in which fixed definitions and contexts are no longer appropriate. This, of course, is chaotic and abstract. We, therefore, naturally tend to seek a foothold in a fixed and familiar location and a continuity with the past, out of which an understanding of the present continually evolves. It is as though we are pulled equally in antithetical directions. Yet, out of this contradiction arises the creative impetus of life. Like the Phoenix rising from its ashes, we create our life and our art as we discover how to transform and flow with radical change--even though it often means giving up what we most value.

The nature of change in the creative process necessarily involves both radical and subtle change. Radical change is appropriate in confronting a total block and subtle change is refinement of the chaos which is characteristic of radical change. In their finest hour, the two function interdependently to create new forms from simple and changeless forms. That is how I rescue my work in crisis: I evoke radical change, which in turn, becomes refined in the process of simplification. In this process of simplification opposites fuse and begin to function interdependently, and anxiety created by lack of a refined

structure and definition becomes resolved. As life and art adapt to change their meaning escapes fixed definitions and contexts; an a priori understanding of life, love, beauty and truth emerges. Artists are driven to understand the nature of life and art. Whether they are justified by some practical or empirical end is irrelevant, for they seek a higher, everchanging and elusive form of truth.



















